

Book Review

Jhumpa Lahiri. *Whereabouts: A Novel*. India: Penguin Hamish Hamilton, 2021.

¹**Shayanti Nath**, Assistant Professor and a Ph.D Research Scholar in the Department of English and Literary Studies, Brainware University, Kolkata. shayanti.ria@gmail.com

²**Dr. Poulomi Mitra**, Associate Professor and Head, Department of English & Literary Studies, Brainware University, Kolkata (West Bengal), India. hod.hu@brainwareuniversity.ac.in

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.59136/lv.2025.25.1.45>

The publication of *Dove Mi Trovo* (*Where I Find Myself*), translated by the writer herself into English as *Whereabouts*, marked a milestone moment in Jhumpa Lahiri's literary oeuvre. Published in 2018 in Italy, it is Lahiri's first novel in Italian. The book not only chronicles Lahiri's linguistic migration from English to Italian but also highlights a thematic transition---from representing the Indian diasporic experience in the US in her former works to representing cosmopolitan life through an unnamed narrator who is a flâneuse, a people-watcher. Migration and language have always had a complex connection—for Lahiri, it has been one of how she tried to go beyond the constraints of nationality and identity, as language became for her a means to blur these otherwise rigid boundaries. Jhumpa Lahiri's itinerant subjectivity was never confined to mere spatial re-location, she was also subjecting herself constantly to linguistic migrations through her relationship with three languages—Bengali, which she inherited from her parents; English---the language spoken in the countries she grew up in and the language in which she wrote her most celebrated works; and finally, another metamorphic experience in the form of the arrival of Italian. In the process, she constantly shifts her centre of gravity, going back and forth between multiple linguistic lives while her identity (self) continues to be a work in progress. With her transition from English to Italian, she senses a strong feeling of separation from English- like “a boyfriend I'd tired of, someone I'd left years earlier. He no longer appeals to me” (Lahiri 57).

While *Whereabouts* is Lahiri's first Italian novel, it is not her first Italian work. Lahiri's first Italian venture was the 2016 memoir of herself as a writer--“*In Other Words*” (*In altre parole*), translated into English by Ann Goldstein. It journals her pilgrimage of learning a new language; a personal memoir that traces her journey of grasping a new language and its subsequent struggles. She feels incomplete at her inability to master the language to perfection. Although imperfect, Italian still remains a free choice for her rather than a forced assimilation, which has given her the freedom to be imperfect, a luxury that neither English nor Bengali could ever provide. Like her fictional characters, the author lived all her life in the ‘spaces in between worlds’, feeling a kind of ‘belongingness’ without ever feeling rooted, in the borders/margins. Explaining her desire for a new language, Lahiri reflects upon her feelings in ‘*In Other Words*, about linguistic transposition as a second-generation immigrant. She discusses how Bengali, her mother tongue, also feels distant and unknown in America, resulting in a sense of alienation. Nevertheless, she paradoxically states that she finds her mother tongue, Bengali, foreign as well, affixing a second layer of distance. When she encounters Italian for the first time, she experiences a sudden pang of separation after her initial association with the language. She keeps on asking how she can feel exiled from a language that she doesn't even know properly, in the end concluding that, as a writer, she does not belong to any one language (Lahiri 21).

Like Moushumi in *The Namesake*, immersing herself in a third language, a third culture, had been her refuge—she approached French, unlike things American or Indian, without guilt, or misgiving, or expectation of any kind. It was easier to turn her back on the two countries that could claim her in favor of one that had no claim whatsoever (Lahiri 201).

It is therefore understandable that *Whereabouts* depicts an ‘unnamed narrator’ in an ‘unnamed city’—anonymity gives the author the much-desired fluidity, freedom, and mobility in a cosmopolitan world and its code-meshed linguistic landscape. The unnamed narrator is a middle-aged writer and academic, single and lonely—the type who fits in anywhere. That it is an Italian city is hinted at with the use of words like ‘piazza’. As she navigates the ‘unnamed city’, going in and out of rooms, trains, bookstores, salons, sidewalks, and cafes, her story unfolds in unconnected fragments and brief moments. This unnamed Italian city plays a very immersive role in the life of the unnamed narrator, bearing witness to the narrator’s dilemmas of life and her continuous struggle between the dichotomous feelings of anxiety at human interaction and the subsequent need to belong at the same time. The narrator feels comfortable in the city and roams along the streets and its alleys with a certain air of familiarity and solidarity. The small moments of interactions and encounters with strangers and chance acquaintances are something that she enjoys and feels comfortable with, rather than spending time with people whom she knows beforehand. The protagonist is an independent modern woman, unencumbered by marital ties, experiencing the joy of liberation yet suffering from the angst of urban loneliness - “I eat alone, next to others eating alone” (Lahiri 10).

I flee, after a moment, terrified, from the great flame to the shadows: I fear the flame will consume me, that it will seize me and reduce me to an element even less significant on this earth, a worm or a plant... I can't think straight; everything seems futile; life itself seems extremely simple. I don't care if nobody thinks of me anymore or if hardly anyone writes time (Lahiri 123).

The above-mentioned lines from *Whereabouts* inadvertently sum up the narrator’s life in a nutshell, her fears and trepidation, and her solitariness. Her inner life pours out through her thoughts and memories, which punctuate her transitions from one place to another as the readers find the narrator in different places like ‘On the sidewalk,’ ‘In bed,’ ‘At the beautician,’ ‘In the sun,’ etc. We are left with the feeling that we can never fully belong anywhere nor completely grasp any of our experiences. In the chapter entitled ‘Nowhere’ we are told how she has always been moving “Disoriented, lost, at sea, at odds, astray, adrift, bewildered, confused, uprooted, turned around. I’m related to these related terms. These words are my abode, my only foothold” (Lahiri 153). Thus, the novel is not only about her transition between Italian (the new language she adopts) and English (the familiar language she translates into), but also the collective story of people who always live on the threshold in a shifting world of flux.

We find the narrator confessing that solitude has become her trade--her strained relationship with her parents has made her vulnerable, making it difficult for her to form lasting ties with people around her. Those unspoken juvenile traumas have a deep and intricate relationship with how the narrator perceives the world around her and how she deals with it. It moves as a trace element, shaping her views of the world. The dysfunctional family and the emotional wound not only influence the narrator’s present life but also provide a context for her guarded personality, her aloofness, and her oscillating between seeking and avoiding meaningful human relationships. Although she had lived all her life in the unnamed city, she failed to find a sense of belonging, a sense of rootedness, and this theme of not being able to belong anywhere is a recurrent motif that runs throughout the novel. She continuously questions her life choices and juggles with the thought of “why they’re still nipping at my heels. Which one of them do I take

after?" (Lahiri 85), underlining her internal conflict and the lasting impact of her parents' contrasting personalities. The chapter titled 'In the Hotel' highlights her discomfort and disdain against forced social interactions, a character trait she inherited from her father. Similarly, as opposed to the feeling of hotels being a parking garage designed for human beings and discomfort at her workplace, her eagerness to have a connection with the woman in the beauty parlor or desire for connection with unknown people around her presents a very dichotomous picture of her psyche where she is not sure about her feelings. In the last chapter of the novel titled "Nowhere," the narrator herself confesses, "I've never stayed still; I've always been moving; that's all I've ever been doing. Always waiting either to get somewhere or to come back. Or to escape. I keep packing and unpacking the small suitcase at my feet" (Lahiri 153). Finally, in the chapter titled 'At the Crypt,' she discloses the reason for her inability to connect with another human being. She is continuously trying to contend with the idea of establishing meaningful bonds with people, fraught with an unsettled distance between her parents, a feeling that still nags her even after her father's death. She questions her father's decision to live with her mother, yet remains completely detached from her emotionally and physically. This persistent absence reveals itself as a recurrent image of her father walking ahead, yet keeping a silent and palpable distance that emphasizes the distancing. The unnamed narrator's inability to bridge that gap makes it even difficult for her to foster any meaningful bond in her personal life (Lahiri 145).

A sense of loss lingers throughout—from the trauma of her father's sudden death to an emotional void in her relationship with her mother to the painful memories of the betrayal of a former partner. This feeling of loss is an ever-present motif that is introduced in the very first chapter. Like a flaneur in the city, from a position of detachment, or rather from a liminal space that is occupied by one who is neither an insider nor an outsider, she narrates about her encounters with strangers as she navigates the city---a father and daughter at an Italian restaurant, a group of foreigners on a train, the women at the pool, the beautician at a salon, an intimate fight played out on the street between the married man she fancies and his wife. Lahiri seems more focused on time, space, identity, and interiority rather than a well-defined plot, which *Whereabouts* lacks. It reminds the readers of Hannah Arendt's question about the nature of thinking as interpreted by Heath Massey. According to Arendt, the act of thinking involves retreating from the outside world. The idea of thinking has been associated with an inward process detached from the world of appearances, as presented by Plato's story of Thales, who absentmindedly fell into the well while lost in thought. Arendt, in the beginning, posits this query as a spatial question: "Where are we when we think?", but later reframes it, arguing for the fact that the act of reminiscing not only involves the element of spatiality, but also entails the concept of temporality associated with it. Finally, the question she puts forward is not "Where are we?" but "When are we?" when we think (Massey 72-73).

Her character is very much aware of her surroundings, whether it is her therapist's neighbourhood, the beauty parlour that she frequents, or the dead animal that she witnessed at her friend's country house. The thought-provoking lines are those where she expresses the calmness and poise that she feels when she is swimming: "In the pool I lose myself... I'm surrounded by an element that restores me, one in which my mother wouldn't know how to survive" (Lahiri 40). The restorative quality of water cocoons her from the outside world with its loneliness and solidarity. But at the end of the chapter, she realizes that the water, which she believed protected her from the tumultuous world outside, becomes polluted with pain and sadness. Rather than offering comfort, it now carries within itself the excruciating weight of heartache that gradually seeps into her soul. As she comes out of the water, she is enmeshed with a sense of uneasiness. Unlike the water, which easily escapes such feelings, the sense of agony doesn't dispel itself, instead, it remains rooted within her, spreading across every nook

and corner of her existence (Lahiri 40). Her place of sanctuary itself loses its value and its aura. Surprisingly, in the chapter titled 'In the Shade,' the same water, which symbolized a sanctuary and a vortex that swallows up human suffering to the narrator's utter surprise, translates into a force that steadies the soul and makes them strong enough to face the reality.

As the novel ends, we see her leaving the city she is so familiar with and thus preparing to cut the cords with place and language yet again, ready for a new country and a new language. As she catches a last glimpse of the city before she leaves, she reflects, 'I am me and also someone else, I am leaving and also staying' (Lahiri 151). Told in a prose that is haunting and emotionally compelling, the novel gives us a sense of 'crossing over', of passing through several thresholds, embracing both uncertainty and hope. We are reminded of the lines from her memoir *In Other Words*, where she evokes the image of Janus, the double-faced Roman God who can observe both the past and the future simultaneously, personifying change and transformation. He represents a liminal figure who is guarding the threshold of what has already happened and what is yet to happen. The narrator foresees meeting this theme everywhere and identifying its relevance in moments of transition (Lahiri 39).

In conclusion, Jhumpa Lahiri's second novel in Italian, *Whereabouts*, is an introspective study of the self in search of identity, an exploration of loneliness, and the urge to belong to something substantial. These two very diverse emotions reflect a mosaic of her inner thoughts, which longs for connection and, at the same time, avoids getting entangled in that same connection. Through the self-reflecting lens of the unnamed narrator, Lahiri delves into the complexities of human psyche and human relationships, which are felt from the margins of lived experiences. Through the life of the unnamed narrator, who continuously grapples with the discontent of daily life, she reflects upon her relationships with her parents, friends, lovers, and the city itself. The novel is a microcosmic study of the greater macrocosm of human emotions, and not just a visualization of an individual's inner world of emotions. It is a quiet meditation upon the universal quest for the need to belong in a transient world of fleeting existence. The readers get a glimpse of the novel's ability to highlight the importance of unspoken moments of experiences that shape our lives and give them direction. The language of the novel aptly resonates with the narrator's uncertainty, her struggles, and her moments of triumph. The tense nature of the presentation in certain chapters, as well as the vulnerable moments they create, allows the readers to empathize with the narrator and understand her trials and trepidations. Thus, Jhumpa Lahiri's *Whereabouts* remains a poignant study of universal themes of loss, suffering, and self-discovery amid the day-to-day mayhem of life. The novel remains a wonderful study of the significance of literature acting as a mirror of our innermost selves.